

PURGING THE INDIAN ENGLISH OF ITS DROSS: A PREREQUISITE FOR ALL PEDAGOGY

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ABSTRACT

While the researchers, long ago, discarded the structural approach in the pedagogical practices and prescribed communicative practice for second language learning, a huge chunk of English teachers in India at primary and secondary levels of education still hold on to this ineffectual practice especially at a time when English as the global lingua franca is taking myriad newer shapes and forms day by day. After being subjected to ten long years of rigorous teaching at school level, the fact that majority of Indian students languish in the stifling pedagogical shackles poses a fundamental question as to the very usefulness of this approach.

This paper discusses various language prescriptions and practices which retard the process of English learning of Indian students. The ubiquitous prescription, i.e., 'reading the news papers and magazines' may prove to be detrimental to the second language learners as the variety of English used by Indian news papers does not improve the functional knowledge as it is more often riddled with remote expressions and haphazardly structured headlines. Overemphasis on phonetics in Indian curricula, especially, accentual patterns and phonemic transcription which are not essential for a reasonable level of functional proficiency in English is also discussed at length.

KEYWORDS: *Second Language Pedagogy, Commercialese, Officialalese, News Paper Reading, Phonemic Transcription*

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INTRODUCTION

'The phenomenon of English in India' is a realm by itself the complexity of which defies any singular approach in attempting an analysis of it. While on one hand, the academia and industry emphasise on the teaching of 'communicative', 'matter of -fact' English stripped of 'literature', on the other hand, the colonial clutter hangs like a heavy cloud over the skies of the Indian classroom, high offices, the press and elite circles. Added to this, an unforeseen fanatic enthusiasm for phonetic nuances like accent, intonation and transcription is sweeping the Indian learners off their balance.

One strange fact about the teaching of English as second language in the Indian scenario is the highly formalised and rigid approach. After being subjected to ten long years of rigorous teaching at the primary and the secondary education, the fact that majority of Indian students languishing in the stifling pedagogical shackles poses a fundamental question as to the very usefulness of this approach. Surprisingly, the most renowned experts of language prescribe a very plain and tangible regimen in language teaching. John Eastwood (2013,p.viii), in the

introduction of his celebrated work ‘Oxford Practice Grammar’ drives home this point:

“The explanations of grammar are descriptions of how English works; they are guide to help you understand, not rules to be memorised. It is often more effective to look at examples of English rather than to read statements about it, and the grammar explanations are supported by lots of examples of everyday conversational English.”

The above statement clearly exemplifies the extent to which grammar rules need to be made use of in the language pedagogy. Language teaching is not all about a set of rules of a rigid framework but the kinetic interplay of ideas, emotions, expressions with long idiomatic associations and cultural contexts knit closely together by means of the synthesising thread of grammatical and phonetic systems. Instead of ameliorating the confused condition of language learners, undue emphasis on the rigid grammatical rules certainly aggravates the pain of the learners.

Craving for Complexity

While the researchers, long ago, discarded the traditional structural approach in the pedagogical practices and prescribed communicative practice for second language learning, a huge chunk of English teachers in India at primary and secondary levels of education still hold on to this inefficacious practice especially at a time when English as the global lingua franca is taking myriad newer shapes and forms day by day. Moreover, the ubiquitous prescription being given for decades to Indian students for improving their English communication, i.e., ‘reading the news papers and magazines’ may prove to be even more detrimental to the second language learners as much of the variety of English used by majority of Indian news reporters and journalists does not improve the functional knowledge of grammar as it is more often riddled with extremely remote expressions and haphazardly structured headlines and punch phrases. In the wild frenzy for ostentation and bombast, the Indian Press English sometimes hardly conveys the intended news and the poor bewildered readers vainly try for language acquisition. Some of the hard nuts to crack are as follows:

‘Voter Insecurities feed rise of rightwing, populist politicians’

(The Hindu, Vijayawada edition, December 13, 2015, p.14)

This reads more like an encryption than a caption.

What information can a reader deduce from the following labyrinthine verbal play?

‘With the lone opposition party, the YSRC, deciding to raise the vexatious issues such as irregularities in the sand mining policy, bauxite mining and loopholes in the excise policy in order to corner the state government in the winter session of the state assembly, scheduled to begin on Dec’17 here, the ruling TDP is learnt to have resolved to allow a debate on these three issues in order to pre-empt the YSRC’s move.’

(The Indian Express, Vijayawada edition, December 13, 2015, p.04)

Another nebulous mass of words in the same news paper leaves the reader hopelessly nonplussed.

‘The modus operandi, according to police, is to advance loans to women and house wives who are in dire need of money at exorbitant rates of interest and when they fail to repay, they would threaten them that they would approach court for attachment of properties that they had shown as collateral security’

(The Indian Express, Vijayawada edition, December 13, 2015, p.04)

The primary purpose of communication is to convey the message with least confusion and ambiguity. But unfortunately, due to the fetish that Indians have developed for English, this purpose got changed. The English speaker in India will receive profuse applause and become instantaneously popular if his language is more pompous. It may be awe-inspiring but the primary purpose of communication is defeated. It is this typical Indian mania for gobbledegook which is behind the unanimous suggestion made to the Indian students to read English news paper which is replete with high blown and sesquipedalian expressions clinging to the archaic usages. The most daunting task for language learners is to understand the mystical sentence constructions which result from the writer's unnecessary obsession with grandiose expressions.

Jyoti Sanyal, a renowned journalist and a fiery advocate of clear English, brings to critical focus the muffled groans of Indian English under the dead weight of colonial legacy till date. As he states, Indian English continues to be riddled with *commercialesse*, *officialise* and *legalese*. A well-known daily newspaper from Karnataka has the following expressions as listed by him.

'According to them, working of *the same* in regard to spice exports had not been encouraging.'

'Mr Gowda said... that it was impossible to absorb the workers of government secretariat canteen as government employees... The issue was also pending before the High Court and hence it was wise not to discuss *the same*, he added.

Sanyal refers to Fowler's 1926-admonition to users of English which reads:

Same, or *the same*, in the sense 'the aforesaid things(s) person(s)', as a substitute for a pronoun (*it, him, her, them, they*) was once good English, abundant in the Bible, and the Prayer Book, but is now an archaism, surviving mainly in legal documents and *commercialesse*.

(A Dictionary of Modern English Usage, Great Britain: OUP, 1926)

When such expressions were considered archaic in 1926 by the native speakers, why the Indians revel in using it in 2015 is a puzzle!

Over to Sanyal again:

'A three-member gang waylaid two persons travelling on a scooter... and *relieved them of their wrist watches and cash* together worth Rs 5,500.'

'Six women were *relieved of their gold chains* in different chain snatching and cheating incidents reported in the city during the last 48 hours...'

How on earth could 'a robbery' be 'a relief' to the victim? And what could a reader possibly derive from this kind of distortion of semantic content of the phrase?

Sanyal illustrates the excessive penchant our Indians have for the variety of English used prior to Victorian era.

Overemphasis on Phonetics

A mere training rigmarole in the articulation of a foreign tongue will not assure right pronunciation for the fact that the articulatory organs of the Indian learners are not oriented to the sound patterns of English which may have phonemes that are non-existent in the learner's native language. Above all, the multi-linguistic and highly heterogeneous

cultural background of the Indian sub-continent obviously dismisses the possibility of a single accentual system of English on the part of her vast populace.

The pronunciation of certain English words is so fixed in India, which differs from that of the British and American varieties, that teachers of phonetics themselves may not always exercise their knowledge of how a particular sequence should sound like. This apart, the Received Pronunciation (RP), by definition, is an ideal system, which is not followed even in the homeland of English. Certain pairs like *fare* and *fair*, *gate* and *gait*, *male* and *mail*, *tale* and *tail* etc. pronounce the same in native variety whereas in our pronunciation, they are clearly differentiated with the change of a vowel. This distinction is in fact an advantage for the Indian speaker of English to make out which word he is supposed to take without depending on the linguistic context unlike an English man. However, instead of taking advantage of this typical sound unit, the students are advised with firm instructions to discard the difference and strictly adhere to the so called native system. Thus, the elongated vowel sound of /e/, which is absent in English, can be part of the sound system of English in India if not in England.

Indian English, as it stands now, is an amalgamation of the British and the American varieties flavoured by the native touch of her variegated vernaculars. As Indian English presents a unique paradigm unlike in countries where a single native variety of English could be taught across the country, it is not practical to prescribe one particular accentual pattern in the pedagogy and stick to it. For instance, the noun *schedule* has many pronunciations of which one is a sequence that contains the cluster of a voiceless fricative and a voiceless plosive in the first syllable, a voiced affricate as onset consonant, a diphthong in the nucleus position and a lateral as a coda in the second syllable. Another is constituted of a voiceless fricative in the onset in the first syllable and a voiced plosive in the onset of the second syllable and there are two more varieties as listed in the Cambridge Pronouncing Dictionary by Daniel Jones.

The Friction of Phonemic Transcription

All Indian languages are phonetically perfect in the sense that there is a perfect match between the script and the sound, barring a few. Since such a system is absent in English and it had to devise another script which represents the phonemes with full accuracy. This discrepancy between the English script and the pronunciation is the basic stumbling block on the part of the Indian learner. The inclusion of this component and the insistence on the learning of the transcription in the curricula of Indian universities and various boards of education at all levels and in all disciplines regardless of its relevance and usefulness to the Indian students arouses a suspicion about the very intentions of the language experts and policy makers. Is it implemented in the best interests of the students or for marketing their software, books and a lot more?

Many a great Indian in the past and even today is making their mark abroad in their chosen fields without even knowing that such a system exists but thoroughly conversant with the functional aspects of the language.

MANY NATIONS MANY ‘ENGLISHES’: A CONCLUSIONS

The linguistic experts across the world, today, have approved a variety of ‘Englishes’ as against an idealised native variety of English. It is high time that Indian academicians, curricula designers and decision-making authorities take cue from this accommodating view of the native English speaking world and cleanse the fossilised and counter-productive curricular and pedagogical practices in English teaching and devise new approaches in ESL teaching. An open-minded

readiness to recognize the ground realities and conditions and a collaborative effort involving various stakeholders of English language in India will hopefully form an impetus to the required purgation of Indian English of all its dross.

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